

ALASKA: THE LAST FRONTIER

JUNE 3-16, 2018

This tour offers participants a chance to visit four very different areas of our largest state. We will spend four days exploring the sea coast and tundra around the hard scrabble town of Nome, where birds like Aleutian Tern, Northern Wheatear, Eastern Yellow Wagtail, Arctic Warbler and Bluethroat lend the avifauna a decidedly Siberian flavor. Dare I say that over the course of our time in Nome, the spectacular will become mundane. Long-tailed Jaegers, Arctic Terns and Willow Ptarmigan are just three examples of birds that will be seen with such regularity that they will eventually become a distraction from other less abundant target species. We'll also spend three days and two nights on St. Paul Island in the Pribilofs where thousands of Parakeet, Least and Crested Auklets, Tufted and Horned Puffins, Northern Fulmar and Black-legged Kittiwakes nest on sheer cliffs just a stone's throw from observers. Sprinkled among these hordes will be a few Red-legged Kittiwakes and Red-faced Cormorants adding a bit of spice to the spectacle. Our third venue will be Kenai Fjords National Park, with its breathtaking vistas and scenery where we will take an all-day boat trip to Northwest Fjord in search of rare seabirds like Kittlitz's Murrelet and mammals like Orca, Humpback Whale, Sea Otter and Steller's Sea Lion. In the spruce stands outside of Seward we can look for more southerly species like Townsend's Warbler and Chestnut-backed Chickadee. Finally, the boreal forests around Anchorage are home to species like Bohemian Waxwing, Spruce Grouse, Boreal Chickadee and American Three-toed Woodpecker. The combination of habitats ensures a lengthy bird list that is certain to be filled with many life birds for everyone involved. That, coupled with the spectacular and unforgettable landscapes that will be the daily backdrop for our travels, is sure to make this trip one of the most memorable you have ever experienced.

Day 1, June 3, Arrival in Anchorage: Participants should plan to arrive in Anchorage today by late afternoon. We will plan to meet for an orientation session in our hotel at 6:30 PM and then have dinner together. The hotel is within walking distance of a large lake that has breeding Red-necked Grebe, Pacific and Red-throated Loons, Common Goldeneye and a variety of other waterfowl. Since it doesn't get dark until 11:30 PM, anyone wishing to get an early start on their bird list can spend some time at the shore after dinner. Night in Anchorage.

Day 2, June 4, Anchorage area: We'll spend our entire first day birding in the Anchorage area where a nice mix of boreal forests and small wetland complexes will provide us an opportunity to see species like Boreal Chickadee, American Three-toed Woodpecker, Pacific Loon (in breeding plumage), Arctic Tern, Hudsonian Godwit, Red-necked Grebe, Bald Eagle etc. If recent reports make it seem worthwhile, we may drive north for an hour or two in the hopes of finding Bohemian Waxwing, Spruce Grouse and Black-backed Woodpecker. None of these are ever in great abundance, but they are present and if we are lucky we may be able to turn them up. Night in Anchorage.

Day 3-6, June 5-8, Anchorage to Nome-Nome area: After breakfast, we'll transfer to the airport for a flight to Nome where we'll spend the next 4 days exploring the three main roads that provide access to the surrounding tundra and coastal areas. Our schedule here will be flexible and will depend upon what is being seen during our visit. One certainty here is that we will devote an entire day to drive 75 miles north from Nome on the Kougarok Road to the only known North American nesting site of the near-mythical Bristle-thighed Curlew. In addition to the long drive, seeing this birds requires a rugged hike uphill on uneven terrain to the dome where they breed, but for those willing to take on the challenge, it is one of birding's most rewarding experiences. Even without the curlew, a day of birding on the Kougarok is always worth the time and effort. Willow thickets along the Nome River harbor Bluethroat and Arctic Warbler and rocky areas can produce Rock Ptarmigan and Northern Wheatear. Nesting raptors include Gyrfalcon (uncommon), Rough-legged Hawk, Northern Harrier and Golden Eagle. Other expected birds include Gray-cheeked Thrush, Orange-crowned and Wilson's Warblers and Common and Hoary Redpoll. Both the Teller and Council Roads also provide fabulous birding opportunities with chances for Willow Ptarmigan, Pacific Golden-Plover, Eastern Yellow Wagtail, Long-tailed and Parasitic Jaeger, Arctic and Aleutian Tern, Merlin, Northern Shrike, Golden-crowned, American Tree and Fox Sparrows, Red-necked Phalarope, Red-throated and Pacific Loon, Harlequin Duck, Lapland Longspur, Short-eared Owl and much more. The birding here is always exciting and one never knows what might be around the next bend. Making Nome even more exciting is the possibility of finding a rare Asian or Arctic stray. Past trips here have produced Red-necked Stint, Ivory and Slaty-backed Gull and Spectacled Eider!

Day 7, June 9, Nome to Anchorage: After a final morning birding in Nome, we will catch a flight back to Anchorage where we will have an afternoon to rest, do laundry and prepare for the next leg of our adventure. Night in Anchorage.

Day 8, June 10, Anchorage to Seward: After breakfast we'll start the 2.5 hour drive south from Anchorage to Seward. We'll stop at Potter Marsh where breeding Arctic Terns, Red-necked Phalarope, Red-necked Grebe, Mew Gull and a variety of ducks are common breeders. Proceeding south we will follow the shore of Turnagain Arm, traveling on what is arguably one of the most scenic drives in all of North America. Bald Eagles are abundant here and we may see 50-75 between Anchorage and Seward! The steep rocky cliffs on the east side of the highway are home to Dall Sheep and if we are lucky we'll see some that have come down close to the road to feed. We'll take our time and make frequent stops at wetlands and in the spruce forests, which begin about an hour north of Seward. Here we can explore an endless selection of trails and campgrounds where boreal species like American Three-toed Woodpecker, Spruce Grouse, Northern Goshawk and Boreal Chickadee roam the woodlands, Lesser Yellowlegs perform their aerial courtship maneuvers above the spruce stands and American Dippers cavort in the rushing streams. Along the way we'll also make an effort to find Northwestern Crow, a species that occurs in small numbers in the more open stretches of the highway. Night in Seward.

Day 9, June 11, All Day Boat Trip in Kenan Fjords NP: Today will be spent on the water cruising the dramatic and dazzling coastlines of Resurrection Bay and the open water around the Chiswell Islands. The splendid scenery on this cruise is enough to justify the trip, but the birds and mammals we will see just might relegate the vistas to the realm of afterthought. Pods of Killer Whales are seen frequently on this trip as are lesser numbers of Humpback Whales. Common seabirds will include Marbled Murrelet, Pelagic Cormorant and Pigeon Guillemot and along the rocky shores we may find a few Black Oystercatchers and Harlequin Ducks. In areas where glacial runoff creates unnatural currents in the bay we will look for the uncommon Kittlitz's Murrelet, a species that is declining and increasingly difficult to find. In the nesting colonies on the Chiswell Islands we should get close views of Rhinoceros Auklet, Black-legged Kittiwake, Horned and Tufted Puffins, Common and Thick-billed Murre and possibly Ancient Murrelet. After a full day on the water we'll return to Seward and enjoy a welcome dinner of fresh seafood at one of the town's harbor view restaurants. Night in Seward.

Day 10, June 12, Seward to Anchorage: We'll begin the morning with some spruce forest birding outside of Seward where Chestnut-backed Chickadee, Hairy Woodpecker, Rufous Hummingbird, Varied Thrush and other denizens of humid coastal forests can be found. The remainder of the day will be spent driving back to Anchorage with a planned late afternoon arrival. Along the way we will look for any species we missed on the drive down and take plenty of time to stop for photographs of the sensational panoramic vistas that will present themselves at every curve in the road. Night in Anchorage.

Day 11-12, June 13-14, Anchorage to St. Paul: After breakfast it will be back to the airport for a flight to St. Paul on the Pribilof Islands, a small formation of volcanic outcrops in the Bering Sea. Depending upon the flight schedules which change often and are also affected by weather, we will have one and a half to two full days to explore the St. Paul, the largest island in the complex. The highlight here are the nesting seabird cliffs where we will be able to stand in close proximity to thousands of nesting Tufted and Horned Puffins, Least, Crested and Parakeet Auklets, Common and Thick-billed Murres, Northern Fulmar, Red-faced Cormorant and Black-legged Kittiwake. Perhaps St. Paul's most famous breeding resident is the Red-legged Kittiwake which can be found in lesser numbers among the hordes of cliff dwellers. The cliffs on St. Paul are a spectacle and the chance to stand within a few yards of these birds and observe their breeding behaviors is an opportunity that few people on earth receive. The interior of the island is a rather barren moonscape consisting of flat grassy wetlands and patches of tundra. Land birds here are scarce, but those that are present are exciting for birders confined to more southerly latitudes. Rock Sandpipers are common breeders on the island and Pacific Wren, Lapland Longspur, Snow Bunting and Gray-crowned Rosy-Finch are generally conspicuous and easy to see. In some years, McKay's Buntings nest on St. Paul and if they are present we should be able to see them with the help of local guides. In the offshore waters we may find King and Common Eider, Harlequin Duck, Long-tailed Duck and an assortment of other diving ducks. Making our time on the island more intriguing is the possibility of turning up an Asian stray. St. Paul is well-known for vagrant Eurasian shorebirds, but those are scarce by mid-June. However our visit will coincide with the period of the year when vagrant passerines from Asia are most often

discovered. Some of the more frequently recorded visitors to St. Paul in mid-June are Common and Oriental Cuckoo, Siberian Rubythroat and Common Rosefinch. Obviously any of these would be thrilling, but even without them a June trip to St. Paul will leave an indelible memory etched upon your psyche. The harsh and relentless arctic winter will be giving way to the tundra's brief flirtation with summer when alpine meadows explode with colorful wildflowers and all creatures are in a frenzy to complete their reproductive duties before the icy darkness once again takes hold. The polar summer is cause for celebration and we will have a rare opportunity to witness and participate in this annual arctic rite of passage.

Day 13, June 15, St. Paul to Anchorage: After a final morning on St. Paul we will catch a flight back to Anchorage where we will transfer to our hotel, compile our final bird list and have a farewell dinner together. Night in Anchorage.

Day 14, June 16, Flights Home: Participants will transfer to the airport for flights home.

TOUR SIZE: This tour will be limited to 9 participants.

TOUR COST: The cost of the tour will be \$6850 per person from Anchorage. A single supplement of \$900 will be charged to those choosing a single room, or anyone who wants a roommate and for whom we are unable to provide one. The price includes round trip airfare between Anchorage and Nome and between Anchorage and St. Paul, a 9.5 hour boat trip in Kenai Fjords NP, 13 nights of lodging, meals beginning with dinner on Day 1 and ending with breakfast on Day 14, all ground transportation during the tour, guide service and park entrance fees. It does not include alcoholic beverages, tips or round trip airfare between your home and Anchorage.

REGISTRATION & DEPOSIT: In order to reserve a space on the tour, a completed and signed registration form is required along with a \$1000 deposit. Registration forms are available on the website www.otusasiotours.com

Deposits should be mailed to:

Otus asio Tours at 900 Hillsborough Road Chapel Hill NC 27516.

CANCELLATION POLICY: Refunds are made according to the following schedule: If cancellation is made:

90 or more days before the tour departure date (March 6, 2018 or before): 50% of the deposit will be refunded

Less than 90 days before the departure date (March 6, 2018 or later) and after full payment has been received, refunds will be limited to that which can be recouped from vendors, airlines and booking agencies. This may be as little as 25% of the amount paid.

Registrants are strongly encouraged to consider purchasing trip insurance to protect them from financial loss due to cancellation of the tour less than 90 days prior to departure. An excellent resource for travel insurance is squaremouth.com which is an online clearing house that will help you decide upon and purchase the best travel insurance policy for your trip.

TRANSPORTATION: We will be traveling in a 15-passenger van in Nome, Anchorage and Seward. On St. Paul we will have drivers and will use vehicles provided by the native corporation on the island. These are generally quite large and comfortable. .

PACE OF THE TOUR: This tour will be moderately demanding and will include several difficult hikes. The hardest will be the uphill hike through the tundra tussocks to the Bristle-thighed Curlew breeding site. This hike isn't particularly long, but walking across the tussocks is tiring and requires effort and concentration. We will also walk a bit on the Pribilofs and this also can be strenuous, however anyone in reasonably good physical condition should be able to participate in any of the tour's activities. The long hours of daylight can also interfere with people's sleep patterns and also are a temptation to stay in the field for ridiculously long hours. I try to minimize this as much as possible and remain on a normal daily schedule without regard to the length of the days. However, in the past some groups have opted for long days and short nights. Such things are always optional and no one will ever not have the choice to retire for the day whenever they deem it appropriate to do so.

CLIMATE & CLOTHING: The weather in Alaska in early June is highly unpredictable, especially in Nome and on the Pribilofs. To best prepare for this trip you will need to be ready for a variety of potential conditions. Dressing in layers is always the best option for such climatic conditions and a good supply of fleece or synthetic wool under and outer garments will be essential. You will also need a warm jacket, hat and gloves, warm socks and waterproof footwear that you can walk in comfortably. I recommend NEOS which are excellent lightweight boots that can be pulled over any type of footwear. These are an excellent choice for waterproof boots and will allow you to walk through wet and damp tundra situations comfortably. They are also lightweight and very easy to pack. (www.overshoesneos.com)

Rain gear or a poncho will also be necessary. It can be surprisingly warm in Alaska at this season and you will need to be prepared for that as well. In the areas around Anchorage and Seward temperatures could be in the mid-60's to mid-70's, although 50's is probably more likely. Nome and St. Paul will likely have highs in the 40's although in the past I have experienced much

warmer weather in Nome. Whatever the temperature, it usually feels much colder in Nome and on St. Paul because of the constant winds off of the Bering Sea, so hope for warmth but anticipate and be prepared for chilly days and nights. Finally, the boat trip is always cool to cold due to the winds of off the glaciers and cold surface waters.

EQUIPMENT: Pack a pair of binoculars in good condition, along with a belt pack or daypack for your daily accessories. Some essential equipment to carry would include sunglasses, lip balm or chapstick and an alarm clock. It is always a good idea to pack your binoculars, a change of clothing, toiletry items and medications in your carry-on bag, so that in the event of lost luggage you will have your essentials.

BAGGAGE: The hotel in Anchorage will have a storage room that we can use to stow excess baggage when we travel to Nome, Seward and St. Paul. This is a difficult trip to pack for and limiting one's luggage given the nature of the tour can be challenging. At the same time, space in the van that we will use in Anchorage and Seward is limited, so we must try to minimize the load as much as possible. This is much easier to do with the option of leaving unnecessary items in Anchorage during some of our forays. The storage room is very secure, so concerns about theft are not an issue.

INTERNET AVAILABILITY: Wi-Fi is offered at all hotels on this tour.

INFORMATION: For further information contact Jan Hansen at 919-259-9423 or otusasiotours@gmail.com.